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When Robert Pollok’s father was killed in a timber accident in early 2018, the feeling of loss was almost indescribable.

His father’s death had come about three years after his mother died of cancer. The pair had been both parents and siblings to Pollok, as he was an only child.

“I didn’t want for a brother or sister because my mother and father were all those things to me,” said Pollok, choking up as he stood on a platform in his farm’s seed processing and packaging facility. With whirring of the equipment silenced, his grief for his parents was palpable. “I never felt like I missed out because of the relationship that we had.”



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**Bhushan H. Pandya, M.D.** **Mukesh B. Patel, M.D.** **Ann Marie T. Knight, FNP-C** **Jagannath Sherigar, M.D.**

His father’s death left him to run the family’s small-grain seed production operation alone. Pollok and his father had just finished equipping the new processing facility a few months before the tragedy struck. They were partners.

“I hadn’t even made the first payment on the loan,” said Pollok, who had returned to help his father run the farm full-time after his mom died.

Within a few months of his father's death, Pollok received notice that a new natural gas pipeline had been proposed by Mountain Valley Pipeline. The route was expected to run through not only his property but another property he leased to farm.

"I take the blow of losing my dad and the next thing you know I get a letter saying they're going to go through some of my best seed-producing property," said Pollok. "It makes me really nervous."

In an already difficult agricultural economy, Pollok said he's worried about how the extra stress of the pipeline could affect his farm, which has been in the family for five generations.

While Pollok's not against the construction of pipelines, he said this particular pipeline — Mountain Valley Pipeline's Southgate extension project — has the potential to limit the use of at least 55 acres of his farmland during construction and have a detrimental effect and do lasting damage to some of his crop and soil production due to the nature of his operation, among a litany of other issues due to the highly regulated nature of the certified seed industry.



One of Robert Pollok's machines sorts seeds on their way to be packaged in his facility.

Halle Parker/Register & Bee

"We're something unique in what we do, and it's going to be an extreme hardship," said Pollok.

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The proposed MVP Southgate extension pipeline would send a single natural gas transmission line running 73 miles from a Transco compressor station in Pittsylvania County near Chatham and across state lines down to Alamance County to serve North Carolina's energy needs.

The route follows alongside much of the right-of-way acquired by the Tulsa, Oklahoma-based Williams company for its interstate natural gas transmission line, Transco, in the 1950s. That transmission line includes three pipelines and one fiber optic cable.

The first 30 miles of the pipeline from Pittsylvania through part of Rockingham County, North Carolina, is proposed to be 24-inches in diameter before switching to 16-inches in diameter for the remaining 43 miles, according to the resource report for MVP Southgate.

The resource report stated that the pipeline's main purpose will be to provide PSNC Energy — the major natural gas energy provider in the state — with a third interstate pipeline connection in response to growing energy needs and a lack of competition in the state.

So far, the project has been protested by some Alamance County residents, their board of supervisors and some of North Carolina's legislators, all questioning the need for the project. A letter filed by the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality in November also questioned whether the claim that the state required another pipeline to satisfy energy needs was accurate.

“As of the date of this letter, we have been unable to determine whether there exists an overarching need and demand for constructing and putting into operation, the Southgate Project as proposed,” wrote the NCDEQ in the November letter.

The introduction of more natural gas pipelines is supported by the North Carolina Utility Commission — the government agency dedicated to regulating the rates and services of the state’s investor-owned utility companies — which has stated that the state will potentially face a natural gas shortage and needs to diversify its source for natural gas.

Currently, the Williams company effectively has a monopoly on the state’s supply with its Transco pipeline, said Bill Gilmore, who is the deputy director of natural gas in the commission’s operations.

The utility commission has officially offered its support of Dominion Energy’s 550-mile Atlantic Coast Pipeline, a separate project from MVP’s Southgate, stating it would provide “capacity to fuel growth and electric generation” and “new competition in the wholesale provision of natural gas in North Carolina,” in a comment filed in ACP’s project docket.

Gilmore said a similar argument applied to the Southgate project as PSNC Energy has reported that it could face shortages in the coming winters for certain parts of the state where Transco’s transport was less reliable.

ACP has been ensnared in legal battles, joined by MVP’s 303-mile mainline project. Both have had construction delays due to lawsuits, and MVP’s project faced several stop work orders. As an extension project, Southgate would connect to the company’s mainline.



Pittsylvania County farmer Robert Pollok turns off the machinery in his seed processing and packaging facility.  
Halle Parker/Register & Bee

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Pollok said the question of project's necessity is above his pay grade. He's more concerned about how he'll be able to get his own farm equipment across MVP's work zone during construction to reach not only part of his own land but one of the fields his family has leased from a neighbor for decades.

The project will require a 100-foot wide of right-of-way — half as a permanent easement and the other half as a temporary workspace — and the only way to access his neighbor's land is through his own property, the part that will be cut off during construction.

The pipeline's route also is expected to run through another property that Pollok leases in the area, splitting the land. It would render the area under construction and land adjacent to the construction out of commission.

Between his own land and leased land, Pollok estimates that at least 55 acres of crop land could be inaccessible during the pipeline's construction, which could span two growing seasons.

With that in mind and the uncertainty around the pipeline's timeline, Pollok said he's concerned about whether he'll be able to grow enough to satisfy the customer base the farm has built up over 30-plus years. He's also concerned that he will not have the option of expanding during that time.

"It's hard to maintain business relationships," said Pollok.

If they lose one for a year, "I may not get it back," he said.

"Or," he added. "At the very least then I'm going to have to compete with whoever sold to them the last year."

Pollok can't just go down the road to find more land to farm, he said. Most of the land around his farm isn't suitable for agriculture, especially not in his industry.

As a farmer in the highly-regulated certified seed production industry, Pollok's products undergo several stages of scrutiny, from field inspections prior to harvest by state agents to sending his yield to the state to undergo a series of quality tests.

"If it does not meet the criteria for certified seed at that point, even before I harvest it, it's rejected for being able to be kept for seed, and it cannot be sold for seed," said Pollok.

The seed must be free of any contamination from weeds and disease as well as be genetically pure, otherwise it's prohibited from sale of any kind.

There's a "very stringent standard for each crop," he said.

“If we get a couple weeds in here and an inspector finds it then I don’t just lose this part, I can lose the entire crop because then it’s contaminated,” said Pollok, while standing on the corner of one of his fields where the pipeline is expected to run through.

Therefore, he keeps his fields carefully controlled. His equipment is only used on his own fields so as not to potentially transfer weeds from another farmer’s field to his.

If he were to try to acquire new land, it would take years for him work the land into a state where it could produce the quality of seed required.

“All I’m looking for is, is there consideration to find another way?” said Pollok, still standing in his field with a picturesque view of his secluded home built near the edge of the tree line and his pond behind him.

“Because this is my livelihood and my heritage, and the thought of cutting my land open,” he said, stopping short and looking down.





Pittsylvania County farmer Robert Pollok gestures to where Mountain Valley Pipeline’s proposed Southgate extension project will continue its path through his land toward the south. The pipeline is proposed to end in Alamance County, North Carolina.

Halle Parker/Register & Bee

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Beyond inhibiting his ability to get his farm equipment to parts of his fields, Pollok said the harm to the land caused by construction in the temporary workspaces will take years to reverse.

When Pollok’s family acquired the land — the section that’s set to be impacted by Southgate — in 1990, it took them more than a decade to fix the very sections damaged by the construction of the Transco pipeline in 1954.

“It still had remnants of uneven ground and unproductive soil,” said Pollok.



“It was close to the early 2000s before we had it where you couldn’t say, ‘Oh, this was where the pipeline was,’” he said. “The crops wouldn’t be lagging in yield quality because of where that construction took place decades before.”

Pollok said Williams has sent crews to make repairs to the Transco pipes three times since 1998. Their most recent visit took place four years ago.

Driving up his driveway to his house, Pollok pointed out the vehicle’s window to the spot where the crews had worked a few years ago. Compared to the ground around it, grass grew more sparsely with patches of dirt clearly visible. Thick grass lined the perimeter of the former work zone.

“Stuff still doesn’t grow right, and that was four years ago,” he said.



In working his own fields, Pollok says he tries to disturb the nutrient-rich topsoil as little as possible. He even tries to avoid driving or making tracks in it when the soil is wet and collects any eroded topsoil to return to the field. But the pending construction is bound to be invasive and carry a lasting impact on the quality of his production.

“So many people think that once they’re done, [and] smooth it back over, that you can just pop it up and plant something,” said Pollok. “And that just doesn’t happen that way.”

He imagines it would take him at least five years after construction ends to heal the land, limiting its yield in that time. And right now, efficiency is everything for farmers.

“Farming takes a lot of dollars because of all the things you need in order to farm, and commodity prices haven’t changed,” he said. “The only thing that’s kept it going is efficiencies and how you’re able to harvest it.”



Robert Pollock grabs a handful of seed from one of his machines and showcases it while explaining how his small-grain seed production operation works.

Halle Parker/Register & Bee

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Pollok and his attorney are currently working to negotiate an easement agreement with MVP’s land agent that takes all aspects of his business into consideration.

Eminent domain lawyers say landowners without any sort of representation often aren't given all the money or protections that they're entitled to under the law.

Other landowners in Pittsylvania County along Southgate's route have already received easements offers on their properties.

MVP spokesman Shawn Day said the team began easement negotiations this year.

"While the project team has acquired easements from some landowners along the proposed 73-mile route, this process remains in an early phase," he wrote in an email Thursday. "This process can take substantial time as the parties involved work to negotiate a mutually agreeable arrangement regarding an easement for this important infrastructure project."

Attorneys Laura Hoey and Mark Short, part of Hampton Roads-based Kaufman & Canoles eminent domain practice group, said landowners sometimes don't realize that land agents aren't advocating on the landowner's behalf but the company's.

In representing landowners during ACP easement settlements in Virginia, Hoey said the agents were "notorious" for advising landowners against retaining a lawyer, telling the landowners that it would mean they would receive less money.

Hoey pointed to examples on her law firm's website showing that they had been able to secure hundreds of thousands of dollars on top of a pipeline company's initial offer in some negotiations. In one case, a landowner had been offered \$38,000 at first and the total increased to more than \$700,000 after negotiating with an attorney.

Short said the valuation needs to be taken into account, not only the area of land taken by the company but the long-term effect it has on the property as a whole, such as if a pipeline bisects a farmer's land and impairs his ability to use it.

"That's still an element of damage," he said.

Beyond just the monetary compensation, the attorneys said that having protections for the landowner written into the terms of the agreement is just as important.

For farmers, the pipeline has to be buried a certain depth beneath the ground in order for it to be safe for them to continue to drive heavy equipment over the land. Short said businesses also have special rights in terms of eminent domain cases.

Plus, Hoey and Short said they often just play a role in helping landowners understand the process's different steps.

"It's a painful, difficult process for a landowner. Usually this is their most important investment," said Short. "Why would you go through it without any assistance?"

Day said Southgate's team is committed to working with the landowners along the route, including Pollok.

"Easement agreements are customized to specific landowners' needs, which may include restoring an easement to allow for agricultural uses that require heavy machinery," he wrote in the email.

Pollok said he just hopes he'll be able to convey the importance of his operation to the company's representation and the extent of the pipeline's impact on not only him, but the other farmers his seeds serve.

He's spoken with MVP's land agent at least four times on his own property with his attorney present.

“I’m not trying to get the most money, I’m trying to make a living,” said Pollok. “I’m trying to be a caretaker for the land that’s been entrusted in me by my family, by my maker.”

He added, “God’s blessed me to take care of it, I’m going to do what I can to preserve it.”